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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 005381

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SY LE

SUBJECT: RIAD SEIF, OTHERS, VIEW LEBANON STRUGGLE AS CRITICAL FOR U.S. REGIONAL INTERESTS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Opposition figure Riad Seif and other Syrian contacts insist that the current political struggle in Lebanon is "the critical battle" for the U.S. and Europe. For Seif, that battle "must not be lost," if the U.S. wants to retain influence in the Middle East. He recommended U.S. support for a Sheba'a Farms solution and more active, even-handed peace process diplomacy as indirect ways to shore up the Siniora government. The consensus view is that Syria has contributed mightily to provoking the crisis in Lebanon to try to block formation of the Hariri tribunal, fearing that such a body will be used to embarrass it politically and possibly undermine the regime. There is division about whether the Syrians killed Pierre Gemeyal, with Seif and a few others representing a minority view, insisting it should be viewed as a "mafia hit" by the regime on a charismatic future leader. Many contacts viewed the release of the Baker-Hamilton report through the prism of the struggle in Lebanon. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Opposition figure Riad Seif told A/DCM December 6 the current political struggle in Lebanon is a critical battle that the U.S. and its Lebanese allies cannot afford to lose. "Lebanon is the important battle. The winner there will be the winner of the whole issue." He recommended U.S. support for a Sheba'a Farms solution and more active, even-handed peace process diplomacy as indirect ways to shore up the Siniora government and weaken the SARG's ability to destabilize it. Other contacts, who are not in the opposition but are privately critical of the regime to different degrees, made similar points in recent discussions.

Maverick internet journalist Ayman Abdul Noor, resorting a bit to hyperbole, called Lebanon "the last castle," insisting to A/DCM that if the Siniora government collapses under the pressure from Syria and its allies in Lebanon's March 8 group, "U.S. influence in the entire region is finished."

¶3. (C) WHY THE STAKES ARE SO HIGH: When asked why the stakes are so high, Seif argued that if the March 8 forces prevail, Syria is likely to hold sway over Lebanon for decades to come and the U.S. will lose "a critical platform" for maintaining influence -- and communicating its message on democracy -- in the region. Seif predicted that such a victory will exacerbate sectarian tensions in the region and cause problems for governments with significant Shiite populations, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Most of these contacts expected the Siniora government to survive, with some insisting Hezbollah was less strong as political force than the current situation might indicate. Some, such as Riad Abrash, economist and former deputy minister, expected a

compromise that would be viewed as a victory of sorts for the March 8 forces. Even Seif voiced a note of caution, pointing out that Syria, after three decades of occupation and a long history of dominance in Lebanon, "still has real power there."

¶4. (C) BLOCKING THE TRIBUNAL: The consensus is that Syria has helped provoke this crisis as a way of blocking formation of the Hariri tribunal. The SARG is fearful that the tribunal, if constituted in Lebanon, could put the regime under tremendous pressure with summons against accused family members or even against lower-level figures. Most people here believe that the regime will not deliver anyone for trial or questioning, for fear they would betray the regime. The regime is so fearful, in the view of Seif, "because there is no doubt that they killed Hariri." Even questioning lower-echelon figures would "reveal the mafia character of the regime" and embarrass it fatally in the court of world opinion. "Even simple people here in Syria will make the connection," Seif added. Hizballah also fears the tribunal because of worries about what might happen to Syria, its key supporter, said Seif.

¶5. (C) A MAFIA HIT ON PIERRE GEMEYAL?: There is a division among contacts about whether the SARG killed Lebanese Minister Pierre Gemeyal. Seif and independent MP Basil Dahdouh are part of a minority who are convinced Syria had Gemeyal killed. According to Dahdouh, the Syrians have a long history of killing charismatic, potential future leaders of Lebanon like Gemeyal, who in Dahdouh's view had been very active in re-building the Phalangist party. Seif also cautioned that one should not focus too intently on the calculus of immediate benefit in trying to decide who killed Gemeyal. For the SARG, he was "a future leader of the entire

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Maronite community," and not just of the Phalangists. Resorting to his mafia analogy, Seif made the obvious point that "this way of thinking, of facing a political challenge" reflects a mafia mentality. Other contacts, citing the dominant view among Syrians that the regime has helped to propagate, argued that there is no way the Syrian regime was involved because the timing during the current crisis would have pointed the finger directly at the Syrians and cut against their immediate interests. Al-Hayat journalist Ibrahim Hamidi also made the point to A/DCM that the Syrians did not kill Gemeyal because the SARG had sent FM Mu'allim to Iraq to restore diplomatic relations and was trying to send signals of willingness to re-engage with the U.S., in the run-up to release of the Baker-Hamilton report.

¶6. (C) BAKER REPORT VIEWED THRU PRISM OF LEBANON: Many of these contacts viewed the release of the Baker-Hamilton report through the prism of Lebanon, maintaining the conventional view here that the regime is willing to offer the U.S. help on Iraq, but will not be helpful at all on Lebanon. According to Abdul Noor, the SARG is "actively marketing the idea that Baker-Hamilton means Lebanon will be sacrificed for Iraq." The regime is "is so happy with its conclusions and recommendations," added Abrash. Several contacts cautioned that even on Iraq, the regime would likely drive a hard bargain and insist on knowing "what will be done on the Golan issue" before offering much help. (Note: Abdul Noor noted in an aside that the security services in recent months had a survey done on Syrians' attitudes about the Golan and discovered, much to the regime's dismay that it rated a relatively distant third in people's priorities, behind a better economic situation and better government. That helped explain why the SARG is re-injecting the Golan issue so actively into media and other official discourse, he argued. Abdul Noor passed an Arabic version of the survey to A/DCM.) Seif echoed others in pointing out that Syria's influence in Iraq has for decades been much more limited than in Lebanon. Syria is likely to find it difficult to intervene very actively in Iraq, where it has allies in many different groups, without alienating one or more key groups.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Seif's stern warnings about the importance of the struggle in Lebanon should probably be viewed as a caution from the Syrian opposition about any U.S. or European rush to re-engage with the SARG, in the hope that the regime will offer help in Iraq. In his view, the help that the Syrians have to offer in Iraq is limited, and the demands they are likely to make -- including signals of resolution on the Golan issue, a commitment that the regime is secure, and a freer hand in Lebanon -- are extensive, as other contacts point out. There is no doubt, however, that Baker-Hamilton has stirred up tremendous debate about where U.S. policy in the region is headed.

CORBIN